

Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER II

Joel D. Fenley
Uvalde County

ONE of the early families to settle in the Sabinal Canyon, doing their part to pave the way for the comforts, even the luxuries of civilization that we are privileged to enjoy today, was the Joel D. Fenley family. Both husband and wife had Southern, cultural ancestry.

Mr. Fenley was born in South Carolina in 1828, came to Texas in 1853, married Eliza Ware, daughter of Captain Richard Ware, in 1854. Mrs. Fenley had been reared in the Canyon. Her father was among the first settlers. Mr. Fenley's reddish brown cattle, all of one color, were famous throughout that section of the State. He also raised sheep and goats. Some farming was done, mostly for the purpose of raising grain for feed. It was evident to all who knew them that their home was built upon the firm foundation of mutual respect and affection and its responsibilities were shared equally.

While Mr. Fenley was busy with the economic side of home making, Mrs. Fenley quietly integrated the spirited family into a well ordered pioneer household with limited equipment and practically no conveniences. When the children came to him with hurts or bruises she set them deftly and gently to right again. Her manner was that of a companion who knew that hurts were a part of living up to, over, or through, but never around.

The most enjoyable hours were at night when they sat around the fire, each curled up in his favorite position, frequently eating pecans, while Mr. Fenley read to the children or told stories. They did not talk much about the danger from the Indians, but the children say they still shudder when they hear the owls because the Indians used those calls.

"My favorite was Swiss Family Robinson," recalled Mrs. Susie Davenport.

They sang songs, read the Bible and had family prayers before going to bed.

While Mrs. Fenley entered into the family companionship she was also busy with her hands. She knew just how many bats of wool or cotton must be carded at night in order to keep the loom going next day or to have enough thread for knitting the stockings and socks.

The Fenleys were noted for their hospitality. Their home was ever open to ministers. Many distinguished people came for a brief visit, but lingered long under the charm of their hospitality. Most of these visits were high points in the life of the family. The children would sit spellbound listening to the stories of the outer world, or the exchange of opinion between the older people.

Among the interesting guests was Theodore Gustaf Nasuky, who later made his home with the Fenley family. He had been a German officer, had been a schoolmate of Emperor William, and had been a member of the Saxon King's High Court. He spoke six languages, had fought a duel, had an honorable dis-



MRS. JOEL D. FENLEY

charge from the army, and always carried himself with military bearing. He helped to stimulate the ambitions of the children for more education by telling them glamorous and heroic stories of history and of his own personal life. The entire family would listen to him by the hour as they sat around the fireside. He would spend an entire day making a Christmas tree but thought it a disgrace to accept money.

This man contributed his part by teaching the children in the community. Mrs. Fenley let him have her kitchen to be used as his private room and in which to teach the children of the community. When a report came that the Indians were approaching he would dismiss the children and stand in the door with a gun in his hand and watch until they were safe in their own homes.

Schools were established later in and near this community. There was the school taught by George A. Parker, and a school at Waresville taught by Frank Lurch. Mr. and Mrs. Fenley and other representative citizens were profoundly interested in giving their children an opportunity to receive an education. Their interest and cooperation with the schools caused that community to be known as an educational and cultural center. Children from other communities were sent there frequently to school. Over a period of years, at different times, two children of Mrs. Fenley's sister, two Ware boys, and other children of friends of the Fenley family stayed in that home and attended school. None were ever allowed to pay board, though they were permitted to assist with some of the work.

All during that time Theodore, as the old German was affectionately called, remained an honored guest. When Mr. Fenley died in 1899 at the home of his daughter, Mrs. J. M. Kincaid, in Sabinal, his dying request was "to take care of Theodore."

Preachers of all denominations were welcome in the Fenley home. The early circuit riders frequently preached in the home. Later they preached in the school house. Since the neighbors lived close together for protection against the Indians, they could be assembled quickly and church services were always welcomed.

"And, if the preacher spent the day in our home mother would hand him his clothes freshly washed and ironed," said Mrs. Davenport. "And, one seldom left

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too soon for mother to perform this kind-deed for him."

That service can be more appreciated when one realizes the limited laundry equipment available. Washing was done in tubs made by cutting barrels in half. The clothes were soaked, then soaped, and the dirt beaten out with a battling board. This plank or board was whittled out of light weight wood, frequently cypress, and rounded at the edges in order not to tear the clothes. Ironing was done with smoothing irons heated on an open fire, sometimes in the fireplace, and sometimes on an outdoor fire.

Mrs. Fenley was a religious woman. She read the Bible many times from "cover to cover." She had a remarkable memory and could identify quickly nearly any passage that might be quoted. She liked to discuss the Bible but would not argue.

"She knew more than anyone I have ever known, though her opportunities were limited," Mrs. Kincaid, her daughter, Ethel, stated proudly.

This community became a favorite place for holding of camp meetings. People from afar came and camped. Nearby families brought dinner and spread it on the ground. The ministers did all they could to get people to shout, sometimes for anger, sometimes for joy. Some thought it might not have been much religion but all agreed it was great.

In later years, through Mrs. Fenley's perseverance and influence, a church was built in Utopia which is still standing.

It was at one of these camp meetings some of the Fenley children saw their first kerosene lamp. Really they were not lamps as we know them now, but were more like the lanterns of the present day. Their tallow lamps were made by braiding three long narrow strips of cloth together, then saturating the 'braided rag' in a dish of melted tallow with the end hanging out. This was lighted and burned very much as do our candles today.

The happiness of home and community life was interspersed with the fear of Indian raids. One morning as Mr. Fenley was mounting his horse to go to church a rider came up from the west, or Anglin prong of the river, bringing the news of an Indian raid in a settlement ten miles above. Mrs. Fenley fixed up the cold food on hand while he got his gun and ammunition, mounted again and set out rapidly with the messenger for the scene of the raid. Other settlers rallied to the call. By the time they arrived at the upper settlement the Indians had passed the ranch of Aaron Anglin and had gone across the mountains toward the Frio on 'the old Indian trail.' The settlers found a man who had been killed a few hours before by the Indians.

Once when the Fenleys were living in a house made of stuffed cypress shingles, she saw several men coming. She could not get out through the door without being seen, therefore she pushed so hard against the shingles that she pushed through and with her baby in her arms, fled to one of the neighbors. She found

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Last home of the Joel D. Fenleys near Utopia, Uvalde county. From left to right—Jefferson Davis Fenley, Buck Harrison, Mrs. Joel D. Fenley and Hollis Fenley. Mrs. Joel D. Fenley is the mother of Jefferson Davis and Hollis Fenley.

out later they were big-hearted German men who came to see Mr. Fenley on business.

All Indian scares did not end so happily. It was here in the Sabinal Canyon that Mrs. Fenley's sister, Mrs. Sarah Kinchloe, had her noted battle with the Indians and Mrs. Bowlin, her neighbor, was killed. That morning her daughter, Ethel, had diphtheria, and Mr. Fenley was going after Mrs. Binion, the only doctor in the country. When passing the home of John Ware, Ben Riggs rode up and reported that Mrs. Bowlin had been killed by the Indians and that Mrs. Kinchloe had been wounded. Mr. Fenley rode home, hitched oxen to the wagon and Mrs. Fenley, with her sick baby in her arms, went to the aid of her sister. Thirteen arrows had pierced her body. The Indians had gone before the arrival of the Fenleys, thinking Mrs. Kinchloe was dead.

"I wanted to die before you came," was her greeting to the Fenleys, "but now since you are here I want to live."

Through all the ups and downs the Fenley family was happy. The children did not like to even spend the night away from home, though they loved to have company. A frequent guest in their home was the present Mrs. John Nance Garner.

"Until I married I thought all the world was good," smiled Mrs. Davenport (Susie Fenley). "I never heard father or mother say an unkind word about anyone."

Mr. Fenley would not permit any one to tell ghost stories or tease the children. He was kind to them but very firm. Because he had a weak back he hired all the labor done. With a paper, he usually sat under the trees near where the children were playing. As they remember him now, he seemed always to say the right word at the right time to establish very definite ideas as to right and wrong. If they ever came home with even a pin that was not theirs, he made them take it back. If they did not play right or observe the rules of the games

he talked with them. They were taught to respect the rights of others. They never entered the old German Theodore's room without first securing his permission.

One day when the children were playing, some of them ran off with Susie's playthings. This had happened a few times before.

"Daughter, why do you let them run off with your things?" inquired Mr. Fenley.

"Cause they are bigger than I am," sobbed Susie.

"Well, I guess you will have to bite them a little if they try it again."

A few days later when a neighbor's child attempted to run off with some of Susie's things, she bit him so hard on the nose that she broke the cartilage loose from the bone. The child went home crying and Susie climbed into her father's

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er's lap and snuggled up into his tightly clasped arms. Late that afternoon she saw the mother of the child she had bitten, coming. Once again Susie fled to the protection of her father's arms.

"Your daughter has bitten my son very badly," she said. "So I have come to pull out one of her teeth." And she exhibited a large pair of pliers.

"I am sorry she bit him so hard," replied Mr. Fenley. He told the mother what had been happening and of his suggestion to 'bite him a little.' "So I can't let you punish her this time."

"All right," agreed the mother, "but she must not do it again."

"Well, she must not bite quite so hard," agreed Mr. Fenley, "if your son tries to run off with her play things again."

The two families continued to be close neighbors and friends.

Mrs. Fenley was ever ready to help nurse a sick neighbor, or to take sick folk into her own home and nurse them back to health. And, always she refused to accept money for board or for her services. Occasionally when she felt that she had to accept money in order not to hurt her friend's feelings, she slipped it back into the clothes she had washed and ironed for him. Several times she nursed friends who had tuberculosis. Her children and the neighbors' children played around the patients with never a thought about catching the dreaded disease.

The nearest doctor lived in San Antonio, about sixty miles away. "But, we got along well without one," declared Mrs. Kincaid, "because mother could diagnose symptoms pretty well. And she always had a supply of castor oil, camphor and asafetida."

There was always a sufficient supply of good food in the Fenley home, which in a large measure accounted for the good health enjoyed by the members of the family.

Sometimes during the Civil War they were a little short on bread but they did not suffer. A garden was planted regularly. The Fenleys were noted for the good variety of their sweet potatoes. Seed was always saved from year to year. The children now wish the seed had not been allowed to get mixed with other seed. Corn meal was made from home-grown corn and most of it was ground at Castroville, though some could be ground at home in a small mill. Native food was plentiful, such as wild hogs, turkeys, chickens, bear meat, deer, nuts, wild plums, berries and wild grapes. One of the main Sunday sports was to rob a "bee tree." Enough cows were kept to furnish an abundant supply of milk and butter. The milk was kept in quart cans.

Cooking was done in Dutch ovens on an open fire. One of the children's favorite dishes was hot biscuit with a roll of thick cream (secured from a quart can of cream) spread on it. Another favorite dish was syrup made by boiling the heart of a watermelon until it was very thick. There were watermelon rind pickles, smoked beef and dried fruit and vegetables. Dried okra was sometimes used as a substitute for coffee during the war. At that time most of the supplies came by freight wagons from the Rio Grande. Butter could be kept fresh and sweet indefinitely by putting it away in a barrel of brine.

Mrs. Davenport states the first calico dress she ever had was bought with butter saved that way.

Clothing for the family was provided by carding, spinning and weaving both cotton and woolen materials at home. During the war the family picked lint from cottonseed. Native plants were used

for dyes. Indigo for blue, agarita for yellow and poke berries for dark purple.

While the Fenley family lived happily at home working together, Mr. Fenley was ever ready to do a good turn for the neighbors. The post office was at Sabinal, about 25 miles away. He hired a colored man to go after the mail once a week. The mail carrier could not read, so he stopped at each home on the return where each went through the mail and selected his. The remaining mail was left at Mr. Durben's store at Waresville.

Mr. Fenley died in 1899, Mrs. Fenley in 1927. One of Mrs. Fenley's greatest joys during her last years was the telephone. She telephoned her children every day, also, any of her neighbors, especially if they were ill. She always reminded (by telephone) her friends about church services. Her grandson, Joel Fenley, son of Jeff Fenley, who still lives on his father's old ranch near Utopia, remembers her as a lovable, sweet character, who always had bread, butter, fruit and cookies and frequently his favorite chocolate pudding for him as he stopped to see her each afternoon on the way from school.

There were six children, four of whom are still living. They are: Mrs. J. M. Kincaid (Ethel Fenley) and Mrs. J. E. Webb (Amanda Fenley), both of whom live in San Antonio; and Mrs. Susie Davenport and Hollis Fenley of Utopia. Pryor and Jeff Fenley are buried in the old Ware cemetery.



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